8. Lyric Oblivion

When Sappho Taught Socrates How to Forget[1]

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Given the limits of our human nature, oblivion can hardly be excluded from the scene of memory: most of the time, remembering involves a more or less conscious selection, whereby our memories are made possible precisely by our acts of forgetfulness. Yet the polarity between memory and oblivion is as much a cultural as a natural fact. However fascinated by glory and memory as the highest goal of human striving, Plato's fellow Greeks encouraged and praised various forms of forgetfulness. This, I will argue, paved the way for a radical solution, which sees the polarity in terms of a direct correlation that emphasises the positive role of oblivion: in the *Phaedrus*, the highest and best form of memory, that is the metaphysical recollection of the Forms, turns out to be inseparable from an extreme act of forgetfulness, which consists in the erasing of all earthly concerns.[2] I refer to this act as 'lyric oblivion' because it emerges from Plato's hitherto unnoticed reworking of Sappho's 'Ode to Helen', a poem that emphasises oblivion in the context of a pioneering juxtaposition between memory and recollection. Plato, I will argue, shapes his notion of both oblivion and memory through and against Sappho.

1. Sappho on the Ilissus

[1] The core of this paper dates back to the Conference 'Greek Memories: Theories and Practice' (Durham University, 27-28 September 2010). I developed some of the original ideas in Capra 2014a, ch. 2, and in a paper entitled 'Plato's Possessors of Beauty (*Symposium*, *Phaedrus*)', which I delivered at the workshop 'Qu'est-ce que le beau? (Homère, Platon, Aristote), Université Catholique de Louvain – Institut Superieur de Philosophie, Centre De Wulf Mansion, 27 April 2015. After so many years, I have lost track of the many good people who helped me improve this paper: ideally, I thank them all warmly.

[2] I will not address here the inseparability of memory and oblivion as discussed by Diotima in the *Symposium* (207d-208a). Cf. the perceptive discussion by Ledesma 2016, who goes so far as to say that for Plato 'el olvido es inseparable del lenguaje' (107). Cf. also Gonzalez 2007: 288-291.

The scene is well known: Phaedrus and Socrates are on the banks of the Ilissus, in what is possibly the most influential *locus amoenus* of western literature.[3] Phaedrus has just finished reading aloud a clever speech by Lysias, who maintains that a beloved boy (*eromenos*) should grant his favours to a non-lover rather than to a lover. Yet Socrates is unimpressed:

{ΣΩ.} Τοῦτο ἐγώ σοι οὐκέτι οἷός τ' ἔσομαι πιθέσθαι· παλαιοὶ γὰρ καὶ σοφοὶ ἄνδρες τε καὶ γυναῖκες περὶ αὐτῶν εἰρηκότες καὶ γεγραφότες ἐξελέγξουσί με, ἐάν σοι χαριζόμενος συγχωρῶ.

{ΦΑΙ.} Τίνες οὗτοι; καὶ ποῦ σὺ βελτίω τούτων ἀκήκοας;

{ΣΩ.} Νῦν μὲν οὕτως οὐκ ἔχω εἰπεῖν· δῆλον δὲ ὅτι τινῶν ἀκήκοα, ἢ που Σαπφοῦς τῆς καλῆς ἢ Ἀνακρέοντος τοῦ σοφοῦ ἢ καὶ συγγραφέων τινῶν. πόθεν δὴ τεκμαιρόμενος λέγω; πλῆρές πως, ὦ δαιμόνιε, τὸ στῆθος ἔχων αἰσθάνομαι παρὰ ταῦτα ἂν ἔχειν εἰπεῖν ἕτερα μὴ χείρω. ὅτι μὲν οὖν παρά γε ἐμαυτοῦ οὐδὲν αὐτῶν ἐννενόηκα, εὖ οἶδα, συνειδὼς ἐμαυτῷ ἀμαθίαν· λείπεται δὴ οἶμαι ἐξ ἀλλοτρίων ποθὲν ναμάτων διὰ τῆς ἀκοῆς πεπληρῶσθαί με δίκην ἀγγείου. ὑπὸ δὲ νωθείας αὖ καὶ αὐτὸ τοῦτο ἐπιλέλησμαι, ὅπως τε καὶ ὧντινων ἤκουσα.

Soc. That's where I shall no longer be able to go along with you; men and women of old, wise people who have spoken and written about the subject, will refute me if I agree as a favour to you.

Phaedr. Who are these people? And where have you heard better things than there are in Lysias' speech?

Soc. At the moment I can't say, just like that, but clearly I *have* heard something, either – maybe – from the beautiful Sappho, or from Anacreon the wise, or indeed from some prose-writers. On what evidence do I say this? My breast is full, if I may say so, my fine fellow, and I see that I would have other things to say beyond what Lysias says, and no worse either. I am well aware that I have thought up none of them from within *my* resources, because I am conscious of my own ignorance; the only alternative, then, I think, is that I have been filled up through my ears, like a vessel, from someone else's

[3] See Hunter 2012.

streams. But dullness again has made me forget this very thing, how I heard it and from whom. (*Phaedrus,* 235b-d, transl. Rowe)

As well as providing a nice introduction to our topic in the shape of an allegedly amnesic Socrates, this passage, with its mention of Sappho and Anacreon, can work as a litmus test for Platonic scholarship. In olden days, such references to poetry used to pass unnoticed, or else they were quickly dismissed as mere embellishments. The first article specifically devoted to this passage dates back to 1966, when a distinguished scholar came up with the suggestion that 'the purpose for naming these poets is to anticipate poetic reminiscences'.[4] These days, such a statement is likely to sound unsophisticated to most readers: the scholarly landscape has radically changed since that time, and Plato has metamorphosed into a master of polyphony à la Bachtin and as a swift manipulator of metaphors à la Ricoeur.

Despite certain excesses, the consequences for our passage are intriguing: not only are scholars increasingly aware that Plato appropriates Sappho's poems, but 'Plato's Sappho' is at the centre of a lively debate, mostly focused on issues of gender.[5] As for *genre*, Andrea Nightingale has suggested that the *Phaedrus* differs from other dialogues in that 'it abandons the notion that traditional genres of poetry and rhetoric are inherently "un-philosophical"'.[6] In Bakhtin's terms, as adopted by Nightingale, this amounts to 'passive double-voiced discourse': the author 'assumes a passive stance, thus allowing the alien genre to play an active and relatively autonomous role in the text'.[7] As a result, Nightingale considers the genre of lyric poetry as a crucial ingredient of Socrates' palinode.[8]

I shall return to the 'autonomous role' of lyric poetry at the end of the paper. For the time being, let me note at least four of Sappho's poems are thought to be echoed in the *Phaedrus*. Ode 31 Voigt is probably a crucial source for the symptoms experienced by

[4] Fortenbaugh 1966: 108.
[5] See e.g. Burnett 1979, Dubois 1985 and 1995, and Foley 1998.
[6] Nightingale 1995: 133.
[7] Nightingale 1995: 149.
[8] One possible objection is that, as Genette 1979 noticed long ago, in the eyes of Plato's contemporaries there was no such thing as 'lyric poetry', the relevant genre, and its alleged *Weltanshauung*, being a modern construction. The *Phaedrus*, however, comes close to 'inventing' the genre: cf. Capra 2014b. The very notion of palinode, of course, calls to mind Stesichorus' lyric poetry. Cf. Capra 2014a, ch. 1.

the lover at 251a-252e. Sappho 2 Voigt is an important precedent for the setting of the *Phaedrus*, as Sappho's *locus amoenus* has much in common with Plato's. Sappho 1, the 'Ode to Aphrodite', is possibly echoed twice: at 241a-b, when Socrates describes the lover's flip-flop once his passion is extinguished, and at 246e, where the image of the charioteer is arguably inspired by Aphrodite's divine chariot as described by Sappho.[9] Finally, Sappho 96 possibly influences Plato's imagery when Socrates recounts how the lover grows wings (251b-c). Moreover, scholars have long been looking for thematic and even philosophical links between Plato and Sappho, given that a long-standing tradition views Sappho as a proto-philosopher, 'concerned' – to quote Bruno Snell's typically grand formulation – 'to grasp a piece of genuine reality: to find Being instead of Appearance'.[10]

2. Plato's Hymn to Memory

As well as alerting the reader to possible poetic echoes, Socrates' mention of Sappho and Anacreon announces something peculiar: he is filled 'with the streams of another', and Phaedrus readily remarks his unusual eloquence (238b). Socrates' speeches are arranged carefully into a climax relating to poetic possession, which he credits not only to ancient poets, but to the inspiring landscape, the local divinities, his own *daimon*, and the 'chorus' of the cicadas.[11] Inspired Socrates succeeds in beating Lysias at his own game: his first speech proves far superior in force, clarity and inventiveness. At this point, Socrates makes it clear that his inspiration is growing wild: at any time the Nymphs might abduct him in *ekstasis* (238d).

Ekstasis is crucial to Socrates' second speech or 'palinode', which argues for an opposite thesis and opens with the famous distinction between two opposite forms of madness, one good and divine, one bad and human. Here is a major innovation,

[9] See Pender 2007: 21.

[10] Snell 1953: 50 (orig. Hamburg 1948[2]). Philosophical interpretations of Sappho, although certainly not in such an idealistic and teleological vein, are now common in the Anglo-Saxon literature as well. See e.g. Baxter 2007, who builds on the testimony of Maximus of Tyre (18.9) and Greene-Skinner 2009 on the 'new Sappho' and its philosophical entanglements. Sappho's poems have been rightly described as 'both intensely passionate and resolutely abstract' (Most 1996: 34). For other references, see below (given the vastness of the relevant bibliography, my references to Sappho as a proto-philosopher will be limited to the poem I directly discuss, namely 16). Plutarch provides an important precedent for a philosophical reading of Sappho's poetry (cf. Zadorojny 1999).

[11] For a very useful list of such sources, cf. Cairns 2013.

which has remarkable consequences even for Socrates' vocabulary, now shifting in important ways. The lover is described as ecstatic, the Greek verb being ἐκπλήττω.[12] Along with its cognate ἔκπληξις, which LSJ renders as 'mental disturbance', this verb is a favourite in Plato's vocabulary: it conveys the basic idea that passions overwhelm and dispel human rationality (including memory).[13] Only here and in another poetic and erotic speech, namely Aristophanes' myth in the *Symposium,* does this verb express positive ideas.[14] In both cases, love is described as a storming no less than exclusive passion, obliterating all other concerns.

Memory perfectly fits in the frame of divine madness, in that ἔκπληξις strikes the lover's mind and brings about the recollection of the eternal Forms. The lover is overwhelmed and shocked by his beloved's beauty, which sparks the growth of wings and 'a recollection (ἀνάμνησις) of those things which our soul once saw when it travelled in company with god' (249c). This divine reaction is the hallmark of a philosophical soul, 'for so far as it can it is close, through memory (μνήμη), to those things his closeness to which gives a god his divinity'. In fact, most souls are impeded by oblivion (λήθη) and only few are capable of recollection (ἀναμιμνήσκω: twice in 249e-250a) and memory (μνήμη, 250a): only these are struck by beauty (ἐκπλήττονται 250e), as if by a lightning (cf. 254a ὄψιν ἀστράπτουσαν), with the result that they are completely beside themselves. This lightning bolt sparks glimpses of their divine past, when they followed their gods dancing through the skies and visited 'the plain of *aletheia*'.[15] This arresting expression invites comparison with, and should be construed in the light of, the 'plain of *lethe*' mentioned in the myth of Er and elsewhere.[16] In fact, the 'plain of *aletheia*' is where truth as 'non-oblivion' is fully manifest.[17]

[12] 250a, 255b, cf. 259b. The 'Platonic' definition of ἔκπληξις is 'fear caused by the expectation of something bad' (φόβος ἐπὶ προσδοκίᾳ κακοῦ; *Def.* 415e).

[13] Cf. e.g. *Phaed*. 66d; *Crat*. 394 b; *Phil*. 26c; *Prot*. 355b; *Gorg*. 523d; *Resp*. 436e; 576d; 577a; 591d; 619a; *Leg*. 659a.

[14] 192b, somehow echoed at 211d. There are some 40 instances of the verb in the Platonic corpus.

[15] 248b τὸ ἀληθείας ἰδεῖν πεδίον οὗ ἐστιν.

[16] *Resp.* 621a τὸ τῆς Λήθης πεδίον. Cf. e.g. Ar. *Ra*. 186. Cf. Heitsch 2011:7 'nun wird ohen Zweifel das Wort ἀληθής von den Griechen der klassischen und späteren Zeit weitgehend im Sinne von whar verwendedt. In der Alltagesprache wird das Wort also nicht mehr als Kompositum mit der Vorsilbe ἀ- verstanden. Ebenso sicher aber ist, daß die Etymologie des Wortes auch wieder aktiviert werden konnte' (besides *Resp.* 621a and *Phaedr*. 248b, he cites Antipho 1.6 and Men. 725 *PCG*.

[17] I leave aside Heidegger's well-known speculation about *aletheia* as *Unverborgenheit*. For a sober assessment of the question, see now Heitsch 2011: 8-11.

Before proceeding to a new topic, namely beauty, Socrates concludes his praise of memory as follows (250c):

> Ταῦτα μὲν οὖν μνήμῃ κεχαρίσθω, δι' ἣν πόθῳ τῶν τότε νῦν μακρότερα εἴρηται· περὶ δὲ κάλλους...
>
> Let this be our farewell/token of gratitude to memory, which has made me speak now at some length out of longing for what was before; but on the subject of beauty... (*Phaedrus,* 250c, transl. Rowe modified)

The very unusual expression μνήμῃ κεχαρίσθω, '*charis* be given', is usually translated more or less as 'thanks be given to memory'.[18] This is fine, yet the verb χαίρω as a device to change subject cannot but recall its usage in hymns: this is a standard way to take leave of a god, and such usage, whereby the verb means 'bid farewell', surfaces in other poetic genres as well.[19] Intriguingly, Socrates refers to his inspired speech precisely as a 'hymn' (ὑμνέω, 247c)[20]. Memory, then, emerges as a godlike entity addressed in quasi-cultic forms.

3 Beneficial Oblivion: The Broader Picture

Socrates' 'hymn' extols memory to the detriment of oblivion, which affects the non-philosophical soul and is implicitly conceptualised as the opposite of truth (*a-letheia*). One may wonder if this Manichean opposition is consistent with Plato's overall position and, more generally, with his cultural background. As we shall see, the following

[18] Overall, the *TLG* counts six more instances of the form κεχαρίσθω in the whole of Greek literature. Three of them are direct quotations from the *Phaedrus* (Herm. Alex. *in Plat. Phaedr*. p. 179.1; p. 179.8; Proclus, *In Plat. rem publ. comm.* 1. p. 205.22), and the remaining three are quite obviously direct imitations (Ammon. *In Aristot. de interpr. comm*. p. 186.9; *Simplic. In Aristot. phys. comm*. 9 p. 90.2; *Comm. in Epict. enchir*. p. 89.26). The form, then, is virtually a *hapax legomenon*, although no commentary, to the best of my knowledge, makes the point (the phrase μνήμῃ κεχαρίσθω, in fact, is not even mentioned).

[19] The formula is ubiquitous in the *Homeric Hymns*, often, as in the *Phaedrus*, in connexion with the particle μέν. Non-Homeric examples include Hes. *Theog*. 963-5; Pind. *Isthm*. 1.33; Simon. 11 W^2.19.

[20] Menander the Rhetorician construes the speech as an early example of prose hymn. See Velardi 2001.

section of the *Phaedrus*, devoted to beauty, rehabilitates forgetfulness, but before addressing it a quick look at the broader picture may be in order.

In classical Athens there were no doubt a number of social practices that actively encouraged oblivion. Traditionally, a highly praised feature of poetry and wine is its ability to induce, like wine, forgetfulness of cares,[21] and in fact Phrynichus' play on the capture of Miletus was fined precisely because, rather than ignoring, it openly recalled Athens' miseries.[22] When Plato was in his twenties, in the wake of the restoration of democracy in 403 BCE, all Athenians became familiar with the political slogan μὴ μνησικακεῖν, which promoted amnesty and discouraged remembrance of past wrongs.[23] A fragment attributed to Plutarch nicely captures a number of comparable attitudes:

> Τῷ Διονύσῳ νάρθηκα καὶ λήθην συγκαθιεροῦσιν, ὡς μὴ δέον μνημονεύειν τῶν ἐν οἴνῳ πλημμεληθέντων ἀλλὰ νουθεσίας παιδικῆς δεομένων. ᾧ συνᾴδει καὶ τὸ "μισέω μνάμονα συμπόταν." ὁ δ᾽ Εὐριπίδης τῶν ἀτόπων τὴν λήθην σοφὴν εἴρηκε.
>
> They dedicate the cane to Dionysus and along with it forgetfulness, in the belief that one ought not to remember offences committed while drinking, yet needing the disciplinary action appropriate to children. Consistent with this is the phrase 'I hate a boon companion with a good memory'.[24] And Euripides said that forgetfulness of bad events was wise.[25] (*Moralia,* fr. 128 Sandbach, transl. Sandbach)[26]

Happily, these days few would dispute the pervasiveness of Egyptian and Near-Eastern influences on Greek civilisation, yet the daughters of Memory, the Muses who preside over the song of the poets, 'are, so far as we know, purely Greek creatures, and have no counterpart in the orient'.[27] This likely depends on the Greeks' notional

[21] Cf. Eur. *Ba*. 282: wine induces λήθην τῶν καθ᾽ἡμέραν κακῶν. Poetry itself implicitly acquires an escapist quality in Euripides' late plays. See e.g. Di Benedetto 1971: 239-72. In general, cf. Simondon 1982: 128-31; 248-50.

[22] Hdt. 6.21.

[23] Cf. e.g. Moggi 2009, with further bibliography. Hom. *Od*. 24.485 is a famous antecedent.

[24] *PMG* 1002 (*adespoton*).

[25] Cf. Eur. *Or*. 211-214.

[26] Cf. Sandbach 1967: 78 '*128-133 an genuina sint propter hiatus et quod titulo aliena sint dubitat Zie. RE XXI 792. sed hiatus breviatori adscripserim neque is erat Plutarchus ut ad rem propositam adstricte haereret*'

[27] West 1997: 180. The etymology of the word 'Muse' is a notorious conundrum. Cf. e.g. Assaël 2006, ch. 1.

'youth': the loss of writing after the fall of Mycenean palaces, and the resulting historical oblivion, arguably favoured the rise of an enduring and authoritative oral tradition, which stands in sharp contrast with the markedly scribal nature of Egyptian and Near-Eastern epic and poetry.

Against this background, one may recall the proverbial forgetfulness of the Greeks vis-à-vis the Egyptians as depicted in Herodotus' account of the encounter between Hecataeus and the Egyptian priests (2.143-144) as well as in Plato's refashioning of the story in the *Timaeus-Critias*, where Solon replaces Hecataeus as the inexperienced Greek lectured by an Egyptian priest. With their sacred writing, the Egyptians are no doubt more authoritative in comparison with 'childish' Solon and his fellow Greeks, yet the latter, as is clear from Critias' account, have youth on their side and exhibit prodigious capacity for recollection-like memory to be displayed through oral performance, which is favourably, if implicitly, compared with the Egyptian priest's inability to relate the Atlantis story without the aid of writing.[28] The *Timaeus-Critias* seems to imply that good and creative recollection depends on historical oblivion, thus recalling the *Phaedrus* and its famously ambiguous critique of (Egyptian!) writing, which turns out to be a *pharmakon* that affects memory less as a remedy than as a poison.[29]

None of Plato's works is specifically devoted to memory, the earliest on record being those by Aristotle and Xenocrates.[30] Besides discussing recollection in a metaphysical perspective, however, Plato devotes interesting analyses to memory both as an intentional activity (in the *Theaetetus*) and as a process complete with propositional

[28] Towards the beginning of the story, the priest famously says that the Greeks 'are always παῖδες' and 'νέοι ... τὰς ψυχὰς πάντες' (22b). Their stories, he adds, resemble tales for παῖδες (23b), their memory is limited they are oblivious to the past (23b-c, cf. μέμνησθε and ὑμᾶς λέληθε). In the end, however, it turns out that Critias the younger has a prodigious capacity for recollection thanks to the lessons of his childhood (26b, παίδων μαθήματα). The fact that he kept questioning Critias the elder resulted in the story being stamped in his mind 'like the encaustic designs of an indelible painting' (26b-c). By contrast, the Egyptian priest was unable fully to remember the story (24a). While there are obvious similarities between the two stories, Plato's in a sense runs counter to the moral of Herodotus'. Plato is in fact ambivalent towards the perceived fixity of Egyptian civilisation as opposed to constant of evolution of Greek performative practices. The question takes centre stage in *Laws* book 2. Cf. Rutherford 2013.

[29] 274e-275b. It is hardly a coincidence that the critique of writing finds place in a dialogue that extols poetic inspiration. Also telling is Plato's choice to opt for the Egyptian Thoth, rather than for the Greek Palamedes, as the inventor of writing, all the more so because 'in contrast to the Greek gods who *inspire* their poets to the heights of literary creativity, Thot actually *writes* texts and functions as an "author", and does not stimulate people to write. In Egyptian texts, divine authorship occasionally replaces scribal authorship' (Vasunia 2001: 152).

[30] For the latter, cf. D.L. 4.12.

contents (in the *Philebus*).[31] This is understandable, because memory is crucial to human behaviour and is also deemed an important quality for a philosophical soul. At the same time, Plato makes it very clear that no *techne* based on empirical memory can qualify as true knowledge, and he is very sharp in debunking any alleged knowledge based on experience:[32] thus, memory is a typical quality of the cave's inhabitants, who remember the patterns and movements of the cave's shadows and are thus pathetically persuaded to be wise.[33]

The comparison between the prisoner and the philosopher resurfaces in the famous digression of the *Theaetetus*.[34] While forgetfulness is not discussed as such, Socrates uses words related to the stem *lath-*/*leth-* to describe the philosopher's obliviousness to the tricks and ruses of his fellow citizens.[35] It is precisely this obliviousness that allows him to rise above the city's pettiness and to devote himself to the supreme end, namely spiritual freedom and assimilation to god. Thus, the parable of the cave and the digression of the *Theaetetus* form a diptych that, at least potentially, redresses the balance between memory and oblivion. In fact, memory can be good only insofar as it remembers good things, which rules out memory as an empirical tool in such areas as rhetoric or demagogic politics. Conversely, obliviousness turns out to be a virtue insofar as it allows the philosopher to set aside earthly concerns. Similarly, Plato's ambiguous attitude towards writing in the *Timaeus-Critias* and in the *Phaedrus* seems to suggest that good recollection goes hand in hand with historical oblivion.

4 Recollection and Oblivion

As we have seen, both memory and oblivion have their merits in the eyes of Plato and of his contemporaries. Socrates' unqualified hymn to Memory, with its

[31] See Cambiano 2007. On memory in the *Philebus* cf. also King's chapter in this volume. Whether or not there is such a thing as a Platonic theory of recollection is a much debated question. See the useful survey (and solution) found in Gonzalez 2007.

[32] *Gorgias* 463a-d is the *locus classicus*. At the other side of the spectrum is 'memorism', promoted by 'empiricists who tried to give an account of technical knowledge solely in terms of perception and memory' (Frede 1990: 248).

[33] *Resp*. 516c-d. The *Theaetetus*, however, arguably provides 'an empiricist account of memory … which is free from hereditary factors, innate ideas and inherited patterns' (Andriopoulos 2015: 135).

[34] 172c-177c. While there are obvious parallels between the cave allegory and the digression of the *Theaetetus* (e.g. Polansky 1992), a number of scholars have questioned their ideological consistency. This is not the place to address this vexed problem.

[35] 173d (λέληθεν) 174a (λανθάνοι), 174b (λέληθεν).

uncompromising condemnation of oblivion, may therefore seem out of place in Plato's world, but the necessary qualifications are implicit, inasmuch as Socrates refers to a form of memory based on the recollection of the highest and most desirable entities. In fact, such recollection is tantamount to dialectics, as is clear from the extraordinary passage where Socrates first mentions recollection:[36]

> δεῖ γὰρ ἄνθρωπον συνιέναι κατ' εἶδος λεγόμενον, ἐκ πολλῶν ἰὸν αἰσθήσεων εἰς ἓν λογισμῷ συναιρούμενον· τοῦτο δ' ἐστὶν ἀνάμνησις ἐκείνων ἅ ποτ' εἶδεν ἡμῶν ἡ ψυχὴ συμπορευθεῖσα θεῷ καὶ ὑπεριδοῦσα ἃ νῦν εἶναί φαμεν, καὶ ἀνακύψασα εἰς τὸ ὂν ὄντως.
>
> A human being must comprehend what is said universally, arising from many sensations and being collected together into one through reasinoning; and this is a recollection of those things which our soul once saw when it travelled in company with a god and treated with contempt the things we now say are, and when it poked its head up into what really is. (*Phaedrus*, 249b-c, transl. Rowe)

The process of arising and *collecting* things together is an unmistakable reference to dialectics, and such a process is said to be equivalent to *recollection*.[37] As we hear in the *Meno*, 'searching and learning are as a whole *anamnesis*' (81d), and dialectics and recollection are, by and large, two equivalent processes.[38] Both require contempt for earthly realities, which are said to be but are not endowed with real existence. If we now turn to the section of the *Phaedrus* that immediately follows Socrates' 'hymn to Memory', we will soon find out that 'contempt' is in fact tantamount to oblivion.

[36] The passage is extraordinary also for the imperviousness of the Greek, which has prompted many readings and emendations. A detailed discussion is found in Hoffmann – Rashed 2008, who argue for ἰέναι *pro* ἰόν.

[37] Cf. e.g. Carter 1967: 115. Punning on (re)collection may not be inappropriate, as the Greek possibly contains a comparable pun (συνιέναι … ἰὸν … εἰς ἓν, and see *Crat*. 412a for the ambiguity of συνιέναι, which may derive from either συνίημι or σύνειμι). Cf. Hoffmann – Rashed 2008: 56. Their emendation (ἰέναι *pro* ἰόν) would make the word play fully explicit.

[38] Cf. e.g. Trabattoni 2012: 313-4. This of course does not mean that there are no 'phenomenological' differences: whereas recollection, in the *Phaedrus*, is a dramatic process brought about by the shock of beauty, which is the only Form to be somehow visible on earth, dialectics, as sketched in the *Republic* and in other dialogues, is a long and painstaking procedure. Cf. Scott 1995: 80-85, whose arguments support the equivalence between recollection in the *Phaedo* and the painful acquisition of knowledge depicted in the parable of the cave.

To begin with, we come across a distinction between the corrupt man and the initiated, who has seen much of the Forms in his pre-natal wanderings through the heavens. The former 'does not move keenly from here to there, to beauty itself' (250e), so that the sight of beauty (a handsome youth) makes him 'surrender to pleasure', in a beastly attempt to cover his beloved. On the contrary, the latter is overwhelmed by beauty, resulting in awe, shuddering, sweating, high fever, until he grows divine wings (251a ff.). By fairly general consensus, Plato borrowed the list of symptoms from Sappho 31.[39] We reach here the climax of the entire passage, which I quote in full:

> ... πᾶσα κεντουμένη κύκλῳ ἡ ψυχὴ οἰστρᾷ καὶ ὀδυνᾶται, μνήμην δ' αὖ ἔχουσα τοῦ καλοῦ γέγηθεν. ἐκ δὲ ἀμφοτέρων μεμειγμένων ἀδημονεῖ τε τῇ ἀτοπίᾳ τοῦ πάθους καὶ ἀποροῦσα λυττᾷ, καὶ ἐμμανὴς οὖσα οὔτε νυκτὸς δύναται καθεύδειν οὔτε μεθ' ἡμέραν οὗ ἂν ᾖ μένειν, θεῖ δὲ ποθοῦσα ὅπου ἂν οἴηται ὄψεσθαι τὸν ἔχοντα τὸ κάλλος· ἰδοῦσα δὲ καὶ ἐποχετευσαμένη ἵμερον ἔλυσε μὲν τὰ τότε συμπεφραγμένα, ἀναπνοὴν δὲ λαβοῦσα κέντρων τε καὶ ὠδίνων ἔληξεν, ἡδονὴν δ' αὖ ταύτην γλυκυτάτην ἐν τῷ παρόντι καρποῦται. ὅθεν δὴ ἑκοῦσα εἶναι οὐκ ἀπολείπεται, οὐδέ τινα τοῦ καλοῦ περὶ πλείονος ποιεῖται, ἀλλὰ μητέρων τε καὶ ἀδελφῶν καὶ ἑταίρων πάντων λέλησται, καὶ οὐσίας δι' ἀμέλειαν ἀπολλυμένης παρ' οὐδὲν τίθεται, νομίμων δὲ καὶ εὐσχημόνων, οἷς πρὸ τοῦ ἐκαλλωπίζετο, πάντων καταφρονήσασα δουλεύειν ἑτοίμη καὶ κοιμᾶσθαι ὅπου ἂν ἐᾷ τις ἐγγυτάτω τοῦ πόθου· πρὸς γὰρ τῷ σέβεσθαι τὸν τὸ κάλλος ἔχοντα ἰατρὸν ηὕρηκε μόνον τῶν μεγίστων πόνων. τοῦτο δὲ τὸ πάθος, ὦ παῖ καλέ, πρὸς ὃν δή μοι ὁ λόγος, ἄνθρωποι μὲν ἔρωτα ὀνομάζουσιν...
>
> ... the entire soul, stung all over, goes mad with pain; but then, remembering the beautiful, it rejoices again. The mixture of both these states makes it despair at the strangeness of its condition, raging in its perplexity, and in its madness it can neither sleep at night nor keep still where it is by day, but passionately runs wherever it thinks it will see the possessor of beauty; and when it has seen the possessor and channelled desire in to itself it releases what was pent up before, and finding a breathing space it ceases from its stinging birth-pains, once more enjoying this for the moment as the sweetest pleasure. This it does not willingly give up, nor does it value anyone above the one with beauty,

[39] Cf. *e.g.* Yunis 2011: 152. Even the medical twist implicit in Socrates' words seems to evoke Sappho, who arguably describes a panic attack, with a vocabulary that is intriguingly paralleled in the Hippocratic Corpus: see Ferrari 2010: 171.

but quite forgets mother, brothers, friends, all together, not caring about the loss of its wealth through neglect, and with contempt for all the accepted standards of propriety and good taste in which it previously prided itself it is ready to act the part of a slave and sleep wherever it is allowed to do so, provided it is as close as possible to the object of its longing; for in addition to its reverence for the possessor of beauty, it has found him the sole healer of its greatest sufferings. This experience, my beautiful boy, men term 'love'. (*Phaedrus*, 251d-252b, transl. Rowe modified)

Remarkably, both the subject and the object of love are presented as abstract, hardly individual entities, whereas certain overtones cannot but evoke erotic intercourse. Moreover, the lover's contempt for earthly things, which is of course a result of the lover's recollection of the Forms, brings about a turning of values upside down, which takes the form of oblivion, thus making explicit the case for a good form of forgetfulness.[40]

5. In the name of Helen

Plato's true lover, it turned out, is someone who forgets everyday values – mother, brothers, friends, riches – only to devote himself to what Plato refers to as 'the possessor of beauty'. What is the source of this dramatic change? Sappho's 'ode to Helen' may help answer this question:[41]

o]ἰ μὲν ἰππήων στρότον οἰ δὲ πέσδων
οἰ δὲ νάων φαῖς' ἐπ[ὶ] γᾶν μέλαι[ν]αν
ἔ]μμεναι κάλλιστον, ἔγω δὲ κῆν' ὅτ-
τω τις ἔραται·
πά]γχυ δ' εὔμαρες σύνετον πόηται (5)

[40] For the key role of forgetfulness in the educational path of Plato's philosophical dialectic see also Wygoda's chapter in this volume.

[41] Fr. 16. I reproduce the text provided by Obbink 2016, which makes use of the most recent papyrological finds, but I add the supplement *οὐδὲ θέλοι*] at line 12, which is most likely on palaeographical grounds: hardly any other supplement is compatible with the trace of a grave accent at the beginning of the line (see Martinelli Tempesta 1999). It is not certain that the poem ended at l. 20: cf. e.g. Lardinois 2009.

π]άντι τ[ο]ῦτ’· ἀ γὰρ πόλυ περσκέθοισα

κ̣άλ̣λο̣ς̣ [ἀνθ]ρώπων Ἐλένα [τ̣ὸ̣]ν ἄνδρα

.τόν̣[περ ἄρ̣]ιστον

κ̣αλλ[ίποι]ς̣’ ἔβα ‘c Τροΐαν πλέ̣ο̣ισα

κωὐδ[ὲ πα]ῖδος οὐδὲ φίλων τοκήων (10)

π̣ά[μπαν] ἐμνάσθη, ἀλλὰ παράγα̣γ’ α̣ὔταν

___ *οὐδὲ θέλοι*]σαν

[. . . . γν]αμπτον γὰρ [. . . . .]ν̣όημμα

[. . . . .]. . . κούφως τ[. . . . . .]νοησι.

[. .]μ̣ε νῦν Ἀνακτορί[ας] ὀν̣έμναι- (15)

[ς’ οὐ] παρεοίσας,

[τᾶ]ς κε βολλοίμαν ἔρατόν τε βᾶμα

κἀμάρυχμα λάμπρον ἴδην προσώπω

ἢ τὰ Λύδων ἄρματα κἀν ὅπλοισι

[πεσδομ]άχεντας. (20)

Some say an army of cavalry, others of infantry,

and others of ships, is the finest thing[42]

upon the black earth — but I say it is whatever

one is in love with.

And it is totally easy to make this plain

to all, for even she who far surpassed

[42] Konstan 2015 emphasises the crucial semantic distinction between the adjective καλός (‘fine’) and the noun κάλλος (‘beauty’), which in archaic poetry ‘is primarily ascribed to good-looking youths, or to adults … who are noted for their seductiveness ‘ (22). In fr. 50 Sappho explicitly toys with the meaning of the adjective (‘fine’ in its ordinary meaning but ‘beautiful’ or ‘handsome’ when in conjunction with ἴδην ‘gazing’). I believe that a comparable shift is at work here: by the end of the poem, with the mention of κάλλος and ἴδην, the adjective is retrospectively re-defined. 50 V. explicitly argues that whoever is good is also handsome; fr. 16 argues that what is truly beautiful, i.e. displays κάλλος and induces love, is finer than (what people take as) the finest things, at least in the eyes of a lover. Sappho’s intention to toy with the meaning of the word(s) is also signalled by the pun κάλλος / καλλίποισα (9).

everyone in beauty, Helen, abandoned

the best of men, her husband,[43]

when she departed for Troy by sail,

giving no mind to her child

or beloved parent, led astray

– far from willing –

for (in)flexible … thought

lightly thinks

brings to my mind now Anaktoria,

who is gone

her beloved step, the bright spark

of her face, I would rather see

than the chariots of Lydia, than any march

of soldiers at arms.

In the extant fragments, this is the only time in which Sappho tries to 'demonstrate' a general thesis to 'everyone'.[44] This gives the ode a curiously proto-philosophical turn.[45]

As in Socrates' speech, the poem may be taken to entail a full '*Umwertung aller Werte*',[46] in what looks like an inquiry into the ultimate object of love (compare

[43] I translate ἄνδρα as 'the best of men, her husband' because the Greek word is used for both (male) men and husbands, and the context seems to require both meanings.

[44] Cf. *e.g.* Bouvrie Thorsen 1978: 13.

[45] Accordingly, scholars have labelled Sappho's stance as sophistic (e.g. Race 1989-90, who stresses Sappho's arguments for subjective and emotional choices), aesthetic (e.g. Koniaris 1967, who takes τὸ κάλλιστον as the pivotal element of the ode), relativist (Zellner 2007, arguing that the poem is an instance of Inference to the Best Explanation), political (Svenbro 1984, arguing for a feminist interpretation), logical/rhetorical (Most 1981, who interprets the poem in the light of Arist. *Rhet*. 1398b19-1398a6), pedagogical (Johnson 2012, who compares the unusual pedagogy of Sappho and Socrates). To be sure, other scholars have resisted the temptation of interpreting 16 Voigt in a philosophical perspective, either by claiming that the poem is obscure (e.g. Page 1955: 53) and discontinuous (Fränkel 1955: 92) or by stressing its religious (e.g. Privitera 1967), performative (e.g. Dodson-Robinson 2010) and ritual (e.g. Bierl 2003, who also offers a good survey of previous interpretations) dimension. I would opt for a middle ground: ancient readers, as is the case with recent scholars, could have found in the poem 'the seeds of a variety of arguments that claim it for philosophy' (Foley 1998: 62).

[46] So runs the title of Wills 1967, who stresses the strongly assertive tone of Sappho's poem. Plato *may* have understood the poem in this way.

Sappho's ὄττω τις ἔραται and Plato's ἐρᾷ μὲν οὖν, ὅτου δὲ ἀπορεῖ). Sappho's Helen, who is referred to as the 'hyper-possessor of beauty' (6-7),[47] *forgets* her parents, daughter and excellent husband. At the same time, Helen's story reminds Sappho of Anactoria.[48] Beside an interesting dialectic between memory and oblivion, we may note the juxtaposition between the verb μέμνημαι, 'remember', and ἀναμιμνήσκω, '(cause somebody to) recollect', which is no doubt exceptional and, again, may sound 'proto-philosophical'.[49]

Points of context – Socrates' speech is compared to a palinode to Helen, and love symptoms have just been described in Sapphic tones – enhance Plato's echoing of this often echoed poem.[50] Sappho is a model for the reversal of values brought about by the shocking experience of falling in love, and, more specifically, for the oblivion this brings about: lovers forget their relatives and pursuits and cannot but recall love. In both cases, the evocation of the beloved has a shining quality (compare Sappho's κἀμάρυχμα λάμπρον ἴδην προσώπω with Plato's κάλλος ἰδεῖν λαμπρόν, 250b, and θεοειδὲς πρόσωπον ἴδῃ, 251a) but perhaps the two texts are even closer.

André Lardinois (2008) has convincingly shown that, in Sappho's extant poetry, whenever a character longs for her beloved she evokes a moment of performance, namely dance and music as practiced by Sappho and her companions. This is very clear in some cases, and Lardinois argues that it is implicit in our poem: Sappho remembers Anaktoria's 'lovely step', which by itself may evoke dance, and even the 'shining spark of her face' seems to suggest movement, in that in early Greek poetry ἀμάρυγμα and its cognates are used either for glittering gestures or as an epithet of the Graces, who are of course dancing goddesses.[51]

These 'choral' traits resurface in the *Phaedrus*. When struck by the youth's beauty, the lover remembers the time when he followed his god as a χορευτής, that is a member of a chorus (252d). After the end of the palinode, as a symbol for the uncompromising

[47] Of course περσκέθοισα κάλλος (6-7) entails an accusative of relation and not an object complement, but such a distinction could hardly be available or interesting to either Sappho or Plato.

[48] Cf. Dane 1981.

[49] Before Plato, there seems to be just one more instance in another poem by Sappho (Sappho 94.10, cf. Burnett 1979, 18), and one in Sophocles (*OT* 1133).

[50] The poem was no doubt famous. Cf. Calder 1984 (on A. *Ag*. 403-419) Casali 1989 (on E. *Ba*. 881), Di Marco 1980 (on E. *Cyc*. 182–186) Scodel 1997 (on E. *Hyps.*, *Ph*. 88-177, *IA* 185-302); Tulli 2008 (on Isoc. *Hel*. 1).

[51] On *amarugma*, cf. Brown 1989.

pursuit of philosophy, he chooses 'choral' (cf. 230c) cicadas.[52] The cicadas were once humans who, carried away by music, were oblivious to primary needs and died without realising (ἠμέλησαν σίτων τε καὶ ποτῶν, καὶ ἔλαθον τελευτήσαντες αὐτους, 259c). Accordingly, the Muses turned them into cicadas and granted them the gift of song,[53] which in turn recalls Sappho's longing for the hereafter in the form of perennial song and dance. [54] So here is Sappho's lesson for Socrates, one of both memory and oblivion: forget earthy things, remember beauty in the divine sparkle of a dancing movement. [55]

6. The 'mother of the speech' and the 'possessor of beauty'

As I mentioned at the beginning of my paper, 'Plato's Sappho' has recently sparked a lively debate, which is in fact a very old one, if we only think that Maximus of Tyre went so far as to equate Sapphic and Platonic love, further claiming that Sappho must be recognised as the 'mother' of Socrates' palinode in the *Phaedrus*.[56] Maximus' words deserve serious consideration, as Plato, in the words of one critic, 'draws directly on the poetic language of the lyric poets' while at the same time setting against them 'a need for self-control to redirect the soul's energy from physical beauty to the Forms', which means that unlike Sappho he turns to memory 'not as a consolation but as a spur to further effort'.[57] Yet what makes it truly attractive to Plato is its erasing effect, resulting in the severing of all ties that bind us to our everyday life.

While memory and oblivion are two sides of the same coin in both the *Phaedrus* and the poem, it is memory, rather than oblivion, that opens a gap between Plato and Sappho. In the 'Ode to Helen,' as in other nostalgic poems, Sappho's memory is obsessed with single details: she magnifies the light shining on the face of a dancer, a

[52] A number of scholars take Plato's cicadas as a negative paradigm. I believe that this is demonstrably wrong: see Capra 2014a: 106-9.

[53] The story is modelled on scenes of poetic initiation such as that of Hesiod in the *Theogony* and Archilochus in Mnesiepes' inscription. Cf. Capra 2014a, ch. 3.

[54] See Lardinois 2008.

[55] Intriguingly, Sappho 95 perhaps implied, or at least could suggest to later readers, a reference to cicadas (cf. Rawls 2006 and Pataki 2015). For Sappho's fascination with the radiance of the sun, see Nagy 2009.

[56] Max. Tyr. 18.9. Unlike Parker 1996, Foley 1998 and Johnson 2012 take Maximus' claim seriously.

[57] Pender 2007: 54. Cf. Pender 2011.

hand playing a lyre and so on.[58] Sappho, in sum, makes a fetish of her beloved ones,[59] Plato could not possibly agree: in *Republic* 10 (604d) he attacks poetry precisely because it indulges in 'recollections of *pathos*' (ἀναμνήσεις τοῦ πάθους) and 'lamentations' (ὀδυρμούς). Unlike Sappho and ordinary people, Plato's lover 'treats the sensibles as reminders of the vision, not as objects of desire in themselves'.[60] Unlike Sappho's beloved ones, in turn, Plato's are abstract creatures, 'possessors of beauty', with no names, quirks or individual traits other than their affinity with the god. Remarkably, this parallels the gap between Diotima's eros and Aristophanes': the latter resembles Diotima's qua 'ecstatic' and oblivious, but is criticised for its inability to transcend the individual. [61] So here is a consistent (dis)similarity between 'philosophical' and 'poetic' love.

Through what Socrates refers to as 'enthusiasm through memory' (253a), Plato's lover transcends earthly beauty as described by poets. He aims his gaze at the metaphysical realm behind the divine face of the 'possessor of beauty', as if his radiant face were an iconic window open to the relevant Form.[62] Plato's phrase 'possessor of beauty' (ὁ τὸ κάλλος ἔχων), repeated twice at 251d-252b, is in fact exceptional: with the very telling exception of Isocrates' *Helen*,[63] to the best of my knowledge it is found nowhere else in the classical age.[64] While possibly pointing to Sappho's Helen as the archetypal 'hyperpossessor of beauty', the phrase is arguably borrowed from the old epic formula 'possessing beauty from the gods/Graces', which Plato could take as

[58] Discussions of Sappho's 'memory' include Burnett 1979, Jarrett 2002, Rayor 2005, Lardinois 2008. Cf. also Catenacci 2013, who argues that Sappho's nostalgic poems inspired the representation of Sappho by the Tithonus Painter: the relevant vase (Kunstsammlungen of Ruhr Universität Bochum, inv. S 508, ca. 480 BCE) depicts Sappho and a girl in what is perhaps a moment of sad farewell.

[59] And so does Anacreon, who went so far as to maintain that 'Boys are my gods' (test. 7 Campbell). This may have inspired *Phaedr*. 251b.

[60] Scott 1995: 76-7.

[61] *Symp*. 205e and 212c.

[62] This cannot but recall Diotima's *scala amoris* in the *Symposium*. Diotima *does not* mention recollection, yet her discussion provides 'un esempio e un'illustrazione concreta delle diverse tappe del percorso che deve essere intrapreso dagli uomini in virtù della ἀνάμνησις, con l'orientamento epistemologico verso le idee che la reminiscenza determina' (Fronterotta 2001: 98).

[63] 'Further, we show such pious respect and consideration for this *idea*, that we hold the possessors of beauty (τῶν ἐχόντων τὸ κάλλος) who make a profit of it and counsel ill in regard to their youth in greater dishonour than those who violate the persons of others' (58, trans. Freese modified).

[64] Pl. *Crit*., 117v is only partially comparable. The phrase resurfaces in one of Arisides' *Sacred Tales* (2.300.4-7). Cf. also *App. Anth*. 191.7-8.

meaning that all beauty is divine in origin.[65] In other words, the language of the Forms is the result of Plato's poetic memory and emerges in and against the poetic tradition. Socrates' claim that no poet has ever succeeded in singing the hyperouranian world (247c) could hardly be more appropriate.

Sappho is fond of close-ups, she likes to blow up poignant details of the past. By contrast, Plato's eye captures no less poignant and breath-taking views from the metaphysical, pre-natal world with an extreme long shot. Both views, however, require the severing of ordinary memories, that is they require what I have labelled 'lyric oblivion', resulting in a direct, rather than inverse, correlation: the more one forgets, the more – and the better – one remembers. To this extent, both Nightingale and Maximus are right: the lyric voice of oblivion stays 'autonomous' and Sappho is truly 'the mother of the speech'.

[65] Cf. *Od*. 6.18 Χαρίτων ἄπο κάλλος ἔχουσαι; *Od*. 8.457 θεῶν ἄπο κάλλος ἔχουσα; Hes. Fr. 171.4 θεῶν ἄπ]ο κάλλος ἔ[χουσαν; Hes. Fr. 215.1 Χαρίτων ἄπο κάλλος ἔχουσα, *h.Ven.* 77 θεῶν ἄπο κάλλος ἔχοντα.

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